

Ash Wednesday B
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Trinity Episcopal Church
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Repent, Return, and Rejoice

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Sometimes the church calendar is SO confusing. First we have the Last Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve occur on the same Sunday. When Lent is done, Easter Sunday will occur on the same day as All Fools Day. And today, Ash Wednesday coincides with Valentine's Day! So I suppose the moral of this is that today we should promise to give up chocolate for Lent, while handing out as much chocolate as we can to our family and friends. Talk about self – denial!

But aside from the date, there's something compelling about Ash Wednesday, something that draws us here; more than just habit or duty; more than just the beginning of Lent. What we say and do on this special Wednesday has power.

Today we say – and confirm with a touch – *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* There it is. Much else that we say in here we may hope is true, or fear is true, or believe, or doubt. But this we know: We are mortal. We were born. We will die.

From dust, to dust. As if hearing the words were not enough, they are literally rubbed into our faces. Ashes mark us – and our fate is strangely visible. Then Jesus goes one step further. He reminds us that dust is the destination, not just of our bodies, but of most of what we consider to be worth living for, as well. Moth and rust and thieves can – and will – reduce to dust virtually every goal, every dream, every value, every treasure we hold dear. And we know that to be true, too. These words of simple, absolute truth give us a perspective the world tries both to hide and to deny – and that we usually do our best to ignore.

Dust and ashes. These are what we see if we look ahead far enough and honestly enough. These are the final return on virtually every investment we make. Today we say this, and we know its truth and its power.

And that looks like bad news – unmitigated bad news – even though we have known it all along.

We all know the personal crisis that comes with that first mature realization of the absolute certainty of our own death. We know how jarring it is, and today reminds us of this grim reality.

From dust, to dust.

To find the Good News here, we need to begin with the past, and with a conviction we Christians hold as firmly as we know the certainty of our own death – that we are created by God – that we did not just happen, that we did not emerge willy-nilly by some cosmic fluke. The dust of our beginnings – that dust from which we came – is not just a matter of chance; it has profound meaning. Our lives are gifts from God. Nothing less. Our dust was molded by the very hands of God, and God’s Spirit breathed life into it. Our dust is holy, our ashes are blessed and cherished by God.

In this way, what appears a threat – “you are dust” – becomes, if we pay attention, a promise. The grace and love present at our creation will see us through our physical disintegration and beyond. God is with us from our very beginning, and before, and will be with us to our very end, and beyond.

Notice something else. These ashes on our forehead are not just tossed there, or scattered at random. They are placed in the form of a cross – so today we mortals are connected with both Good Friday and Easter morning. Today we remember the promise that, as we have risen from dust to this mortal life, so, with Christ, we will rise from the dust of death to eternal life. Yes, to dust we shall return, but with Christ.

Dust and ashes are Good News: They point us toward the power and love of God – both at the beginning and at the end. And they remind us that, because of this Good News, we are called – as we live between dust and dust – to repent and to return. To return to our risen Lord. That’s what “repent” means: to turn, to change the direction in which we are looking and moving, and to look and to move in a new direction.

Today’s call to repent doesn’t center on fear – on what will happen to us if we don’t; and it doesn’t center on guilt or duty – on what we think we *ought* to do. Instead, this call centers on divine love – on the love that is the heart of our creation – on the love that is seen most fully on the cross. It centers on the love that transforms ashes into a symbol of hope.

At the same time, such turning – such repentance – is not something we can think ourselves into; it depends on concrete action. That’s why we follow the ancient disciplines of prayer, fasting and giving, because they keep us continually moving in the right direction – towards God.

So, remember that you are dust – and rejoice. For God is with us – in the beginning, at the end, and even now as we live in between. And repent, and return to the Lord, and rejoice. For the one who created us, who loves us, and who travels every step of our journey with us, is always calling us toward home.